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ABSTRACT

This digest outlines the reasons for and challenges of developing the language skills of heritage language speakers and describes one effort to carry this out, the Heritage Languages Initiative. Specific sections address the following: developing language skills of U.S. residents; the range of language proficiencies of heritage language speakers; the fragility of heritage languages; limitations of current language programs; deficits in infrastructure; and the formation of the Heritage Languages Initiative. (VWL)

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The United States has an unprecedented need for individuals with highly developed language competencies not only in English, our societal language, but also in many other languages. In fact, the need for individuals with proficiency in languages other than English for use in social, economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical arenas has never been higher (Brecht & Rivers, 2000). Even before the events of September 11, 2001, congressional hearings had begun to document a shortage of professionals with the language proficiencies required to carry out a wide range of federal government activities. More than 70 government agencies reported a need for individuals with foreign language expertise. Since September, the General Accounting Office has suggested that shortages of staff with foreign language expertise at several agencies "have adversely affected agency operations and hindered U. S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counter terrorism, and diplomatic efforts" (Barr, 2002).

Over 175 languages are used in the United States (SIL International, 2002), many of which are taught in U. S. colleges and universities. However, developing the high levels of proficiency needed for professional purposes can require many years and far more hours of instruction than a typical college curriculum provides. There exists, however, a largely untapped reservoir of linguistic competence in this country, namely heritage language speakers—the millions of indigenous, immigrant, and refugee individuals who are proficient in English and also have skills in other languages that were developed at home, in schools, in their countries of origin, or in language programs provided by their communities in the United States (see Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001). This digest outlines the reasons for and challenges of developing the language skills of heritage language speakers and describes one effort to carry this out, the Heritage Languages Initiative.

Developing Language Skills

The U. S. education system has generally been expected to address the nation's language needs. Yet relatively few U. S. students receive long-term, articulated instruction in any foreign language in their pre-K-12 education. At the university level, the number of students graduating with professional-level bilingual skills is minimal. In many less commonly taught languages, university programs produce only handfuls of speakers with any proficiency at all. To meet the demand for professionals skilled in languages, a strategy is needed for developing the untapped reservoir of linguistic competence that exists in heritage language speakers.

Range of Language Proficiencies

The range of language skills possessed by heritage language speakers varies widely. However, individuals who have used a language regularly since birth typically have skills that would require nonnative speakers hundreds of hours of instruction to acquire. Such skills include native pronunciation and fluency, command of a wide range of syntactic structures, extensive vocabulary, and familiarity with implicit cultural norms essential to effective language use (Valdés, 1997, 2000). Many heritage language speakers need to learn the specific language skills required in a professional context (e.g., use of formal language registers), but because of their existing language and cultural knowledge, they may require substantially less instructional time than other learners to develop these skills. This is especially true for speakers of the less commonly taught languages.

Given the need for professional-level language expertise, why are our heritage language resources going untapped? The problem has several interrelated components. These are discussed below.

Fragility of Heritage Languages

Without active intervention or new immigration, heritage languages are lost over time both in the individuals who speak them and in the community, and they typically die out within three generations (Wiley, 1996). English has already been established as the dominant language among indigenous families in the United States. Among immigrant families, language use shifts toward English in predictable patterns: Children arriving in the United States are generally English dominant by the time they reach adulthood; children born in the United States to first-generation immigrant families move quickly to English dominance with the onset of schooling if not sooner; and third generation children are not only native speakers of English but usually have lost much of their expressive ability in their heritage language. Systematic instruction in heritage languages that includes formal instruction in the written language, standard or prestige usage, and technical or professional usage is necessary to develop professional-level skills in these languages.

Limitations of Current Language Programs

In the United States, heritage speakers of most languages other than English have limited opportunities to develop their skills. Some opportunities are available through cultural institutions of heritage communities. Others are found in public schools, community colleges, and universities.

Community-Based Institutions. Some ethnic communities in the United States have well-developed weekend or evening schools that offer study of their heritage languages (see Wang, 1996). Ethnic groups with little recent immigration are likely to provide mostly cultural programs with limited substantive language content. For many groups, however, heritage language schools have not been part of their community structure in the United States. Where such schools exist, they generally face substantial obstacles in supporting language learning. Most often, their teachers and administrators are volunteers and not trained language teachers.

Funding, teacher training, appropriate instructional materials, and administrative infrastructure are all problematic. Moreover, students entering high school often rebel against time spent in heritage school programs, where they do not receive credit, and prefer to spend their available time on work required in their regular schooling. Efforts to gain recognition of learning in heritage schools and to introduce heritage language classes are ongoing but have had limited success. To address these issues, some ethnic communities have formed national or regional organizations for their heritage language schools. Because K-12 schooling in the United States is primarily in the hands of local, district, or state decision makers, ethnic communities with large local populations have had only mild success in convincing school systems to include their languages.

Formal Education System. The U. S. education system has made minimal progress in developing heritage language resources. A 1997 survey conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999) found language classes for native speakers to be available in only 7% of secondary schools (up from 4% in 1987). In

higher education, language programming is overwhelmingly geared toward English speakers, even though enrollments in certain less commonly taught languages are dominated by heritage learners. Spanish, the most widely taught foreign language and the nation's most widely spoken heritage language, leads in the development of specialized programs and learning resources for heritage language speakers. The Spanish for native speakers field is served by a task force of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), a Special Interest Group of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), an annual conference, a newsletter, a listserv, and a growing body of research and specialized teaching and learning resources (see, for example, Roca, Marcos, & Winke, 2001). However, implementing separate programs and classes for these students is difficult. A recent survey conducted by the National Foreign Language Center and AATSP (Ingold, Rivers, Tesser, & Ashby, 2002) sampled college and university Spanish programs. Only 18% of those surveyed reported having classes for heritage Spanish speakers, and responses suggested that the viability of separate tracks for these students is limited to institutions with large populations of Spanish-speaking students.

Public school systems, colleges, universities, and adult education programs are increasingly aware of the language backgrounds of their students and interested in addressing the needs of heritage language speakers. However, individual institutions lack the expertise that heritage language development requires and systematic means for interfacing with heritage communities. Despite common interests and shared resources between formal educational structures and heritage schools, models for program articulation and collaboration are in their infancy.

Deficits in Infrastructure

For heritage communities to maintain and develop their languages and for the U. S. education system to incorporate heritage language development into its programs, major needs must be addressed. These are the most pressing needs:

- Information about the following: heritage languages as a national resource, including ways that other nations have developed and utilized their heritage languages; heritage communities in the United States and their social and cultural institutions; and heritage language offerings in the formal education system (e.g., existing programs, curricula).
- Research in these areas: heritage language development as a linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon; best practices in the design of programs and curricula; characteristics of effective teaching strategies, learning resources, and assessment instruments; and public policies in this and other nations and their implications for national language capacity, heritage communities, and multilingual individuals.
- A national infrastructure to develop collaboration, resource sharing, and articulation among institutions, organizations, and constituencies with a role in heritage language policy and programming.
- Access for heritage language speakers to authentic content materials and language models and, where possible, to native-speaker language arts curricula appropriate to their ages and language profiles.

The Response: The Heritage Languages Initiative

Against this backdrop of increasing interest and need, the National Foreign Language Center and the Center for Applied Linguistics launched the Heritage Language Initiative in 1999 with the goal of building an education system that is responsive to heritage communities and national language needs and capable of producing a broad cadre of citizens able to function professionally in both English and another language.

To accomplish this goal, the Heritage Languages Initiative has the following objectives:

- Initiate and support dialogue among policymakers and language practitioners on the need to address heritage language development and the most effective strategies for doing so.
- Design and implement heritage language programs in pre-K-12, community colleges, and college and university settings, and foster better articulation among these settings.
- Strengthen existing heritage community-based education systems, and encourage their development where they do not exist.
- Encourage dialogue leading to collaboration, resource sharing, and articulation between formal education systems and heritage community language schools and programs.
- Encourage research on heritage language development and on related public policy issues.

To accomplish these objectives, the initiative seeks to develop a durable infrastructure to support heritage language development policy and practice. This infrastructure will include pre-K-12 heritage language educators, higher education institutions, community heritage language school systems, proprietary language school educators, U. S. government language educators, heritage language researchers, and consumers of language expertise. Through collaboration and information sharing among these groups, this infrastructure will preserve and develop our valuable language resources.

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